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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: PRT-WASIT: AL KUT REPORTER KIDNAPPED, BEATEN, AND
RELEASED- CULPRIT AND MOTIVE IS UNCLEAR

Classified By: ePRT Team Leader Wade Weems for reasons 1.4 (b, d).

[¶1.](#) (SBU) Summary. On 6 August, Hassan Shaheed Al-Azzawi, a journalist for Iraqi national newspaper Al-Sabab and Al Kut TV, was kidnapped, beaten and held for approximately 36 hours. Al-Azzawi believes the Wasit Governor directed the abduction, but there is an absence of substantial evidence to support this claim, only rumors and accusations made by Al Kut politicians. End Summary.

[¶2.](#) (S) Al-Azzawi told an ePRT local contact that he was buying bread near his home early on August 6 when four men wearing Iraqi Army uniforms and driving a government vehicle detained him, bound his arms and covered his head. Al-Azzawi said he could not identify the attackers as their faces were covered. Al-Azzawi said he was driven approximately 15 minutes to a room where he reported being interrogated and beaten. Al-Azzawi said he was accused of supporting Al-Qaeda-- a charge he vehemently denied-- and verbally abused for criticizing the government. (Note: Reporting in other channels indicates that Jaysh al-Mahdi militants commonly accuse both Sunni and Shi's enemies of collaboration with Al Qaeda. End note.) He was dropped off in a neighborhood in north Al Kut approximately 36 hours after the abduction.

[¶3.](#) (S) Al-Azzawi is "90 percent sure" he was kidnapped by forces loyal to Wasit Governor, Abd al-Latif Hamad Tarfah, because of his work as a journalist. Approximately three months ago, Al Azzawi wrote an article accusing Gov Latif of having ties to Al Qaeda and Iranian intelligence. Latif reportedly sued Al-Azzawi in civil court and the decision is pending.

[¶4.](#) (S) Additional local contacts have echoed the rumors that the Governor was behind the incident, including fellow journalists and government figures. Unsurprisingly, a Sadrist-linked Provincial Council (PC) member also told ePRT contact that the Governor was guilty. The Governor, no doubt aware of the gossip, paid a visit to Al-Azzawi's house but Al-Azzawi refused to see him. Al-Azzawi has since returned to work, including covering a joint press conference held by ePRT and 214th Fires BDE on FOB Delta on August 17.

[¶5.](#) (C) The media establishment in Al Kut is large and active, but there are few independent outlets -- most have ties to the government or to a political party. Individual journalists and journalist union officials tell us that reporters must constantly be wary of the political impact of their work, and risk reprisals if a piece is even tangentially critical of the government, or of any of the powerful political or militia elements. Even the small number of independent outlets generally are too frightened to write provocative, investigative pieces. The governor in particular takes a keen interest in the media, especially coverage of himself. He recently criticized one station for showing women in western attire, saying it was unnecessarily lewd. He often commands Al Kut TV reporters to accompany him constantly and cover his role in even the most mundane

government functions.

¶16. (S) Comment: Given the number of rumors that the Governor was responsible for the kidnapping of Al-Azzawi, and his proven interest in and sensitivity to media reporting about him, it is certainly plausible that he was involved. However, the intra-Shi'a rivalries in Al Kut make for a cloudy political picture and it is possible that elements not affiliated with the Governor, such as JAM splinter groups, were responsible. Although political maneuvering between Badr/ISCI and Sadrist elements continues at the provincial and city level, there have been no further developments in the Al-Azzawi incident since August 14.

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